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“La théorie est morte, vive la théorie!”

When Pop Philosophy Pops Up (a History)

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Introduction

When I submitted my proposal for this conference, I was wondering where lied nowadays the tribute of French Theory, and suggested that a new generation of French philosophers installed themselves on the vacant space left by an older generation of thinkers. I thought an almost abandoned base camp was being reinvested the space with new up-to-date analysis tools. After Barthes, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard or Baudrillard (the list could be argued, but the group is globally identified), it seemed difficult for many to follow the path of those who had occupied during so many years the most central - and I dare to say glamorous position - in the French theoretical realm. Indeed, a considerable star-system has been built around these names who were in a sense at the margin of the orthodox classical philosophy, even if they were teaching in prestigious and venerable institutions such as the Collège de France, l'Ecole Normale supérieure or l'EHESS. But the “vintage” setting of the 70's called in a sense for a refurbishment and a new décor.

Some might think, after the death of these major figures, that the philosophical landscape was pretty empty, or just continuing a traditional path. This is the case for many who do not get the same impact in the media. But, as I stated in my proposal, like in the popular movie *Mad Max*, when the authority collapses, then you can start to set your own rules: this seems to be happening to contemporary French philosophy, which takes from his predecessors the « popular » aspect of their investigations and methods. Post-lacanian like Slavoj Žižek showed the way, but the artistic scene in France took hold of it. If I can go on with my introductory nomadic, outlaw or squatter metaphor, it seems to me quite relevant that this pop'philosophy, that is also called by its founders “techno-philosophie”, sets up in the same way that ravers did in the 90's. They randomly installed huge sound systems in cultivated fields (for the greatest peasants' turmoil) and started wild giant parties on the beat of techno music, until the police eventually expelled them. In the second volume of the *Matrix* trilogy, which really triggered this pop'philosophy wave, a very long scene is dedicated to a tribal rave party that takes place in Zion, which stands for the free world in the movie.

Following the movie (and, a group of young philosophers, called Elie During, Patrice Maniglier, David Rabouin, wrote a book on the matrix considered as a philosophical machine. And a short time after, themselves, plus sociologists as Laurent Jeanpierre or Cédric Vincent, or many others of the same generation, took part to a new group made under the very trendy principle of collective label and

called “Fresh Théorie”. If the nameThe pun on refreshing philosophy try to liberate and shake the old uses of aesthetic theory in France. Is it just a trendy phenomenon, or is it worth taking a second look at it? It may be interesting to analyse how the new generation of French thinkers try to rejuvenate Deleuze’s impure philosophy (*Pourparlers*, Minuit, 1990) and confront it with contemporary or popular aesthetic productions.

For this paper, I will focus on the fortune of French Theory in contemporary thought and especially regarding contemporary arts, stressing how a dialogue between conceptual philosophy and art productions appears to be a central preoccupation for both artists and thinkers. Presenting some examples of these dialogues (Tatiana Trouvé and Richard Shusterman), I will try to outline a new landscape of aesthetic theory in France and also discuss its legitimacy.

1. What’s left of French Theory?

Everybody will easily acknowledge that the notion of “French Theory” is an American invention and thanks to François Cusset, former manager of the *Bureau du livre* in New York, the history of French Theory and its contours came to the French audience. The names were already known in France, for most of them were teaching seminars at the prestigious College de France or Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze with Felix Guattari, Roland Barthes, Lucien Goldmann, but they had never been considered before as a whole group setting up a relevant wave in philosophy. Structuralism was maybe, emerging within the field of anthropology thanks to Claude Levi-Strauss, one of the strongest clue of this coming up movement. They were also the short followers of the Existentialists. And this conglomerate of post-structuralists and post-existentialists individualities began to embody the post-modern French thought of the end of 20th Century. Were these 40 years the time of postmodern Enlightenment? This, time will consider. Even if some concepts are being challenged and discussed nowadays, the echo of the French Theory remains strong, and even stronger in France, now that Americans thinkers and philosophers such as Fredric Jameson, Stanley Cavell, Stanley Fish, Avital Ronell or Perry Anderson are being translated into French, at last. The postmodernist philosophical wave and its followers were greatly represented on the American campuses, and I should add, some of them being accused in France of transforming and distorting the original meaning of Derrida’s or Lyotard’s writings in such a way that French theory would be more adequately called French-American Theory. I am not claiming that there would be two-sides of French philosophy, one that would be the American reading and interpretation (*French Theory*) and the other, that would be the French reception of its own national theoretical production, more orthodox and faithful to the metaphysical / phenomenological hegelian tradition. This opposition is not so clear inasmuch as there has been transatlantic communications since 1966

and the inaugural conference on Sciences of Man at Johns Hopkins University: the connection between France and the United States has never been broken off, so we can consider that the back-and-forth has contributed to blur the real origin of this intercontinental French Theory. The global cultural exchange that has occurred since the Second World War - some would say the one-way domination of American culture in Europe, is compensated in a sense by the recognition and praise of French thinkers in the U.S. But the American tribute of “pop philosophy” is obvious, in many senses.

2. What is the « next generation » ? why is it « pop » ?

In France, after the death of Derrida, many thinkers, intellectuals or philosophers called themselves orphans and pretended to mourn the great times of French philosophy. The problem of the “next generation” started to come and the central question of “how to do philosophy” became salient. My point here is not to identify a dominant force or the void left after the French Theorists, but to show how aesthetic productions, on both sides of the Atlantic, have a crucial role to play in the developing of new forms of philosophy. But why “pop”? In a sense, Gilles Deleuze, or even Barthes with his *Mythologies*, was certainly one of the first “pop” philosophers of the French Theory: in *Pourparlers* (1990, 16) he introduces the dream of a pop’philosophy or pop’analysis, that would go away from the academic standard. This statement was made in 1973, in a letter to Michel Cressole, following the publication of *L’Anti-Oedipe*. In his collaboration avec Felix Guattari, and having himself written a lot on cinema (*L’image temps, l’image mouvement* 1983-85), he starts to take into account new forms of aesthetic experiences. As the decade of the 70’s is the one of performances, video and television, after conceptual art, there is no surprise that these new aesthetic and media forms, along with the development of computer technologies, drew the attention of thinkers who paid heed for their times.

The question of what an aesthetic productions is itself disputable – but since the 60’s, high and low culture tended to intertwine, this has been the case since the advent of the *n’importe quoi* (a notion coined by Thierry de Duve, in *Au nom de l’art*, 1989) in art inaugurated with Duchamp and pursued by the Pop’artists. Indeed, Pop’art essentially exploits the representation of mass produced object of everyday life, uplifting them to the status of an art object, the same way Duchamp turned an urinal into a sculpture. Then, the spectacle of consumption and of capitalism under its most common appearances became a dignified subject matter, elevating pop or mass culture and its attributes to a metaphysical question. From this moment onward, many art manifestations started not only to discuss the environment and the relationships that people had with it, but they also gave some new material to think about, in relation to this wide-ranged depiction of the world, would it be either focusing on society, either originating itself from individual subjectivities. In other words, art embraced more than ever its critical function through displacement, provocation or heterogeneity, making use of medias,

performances or installations. Inversely, as anything could become art or be looked at with aesthetic eyes, these objects could be either considered as a gateway to a philosophical, if not metaphysical, experiment. The first significant case, after Baudrillard's analysis of the United States as a giant theme park (*Simulacres et simulations*), has been the series of books and studies on the feature film *Matrix*, shot by the brothers Andy and Larry Wachowski and released in 1999, 10 years ago. The film tells the story of a hacker, Thomas Anderson whose pseudonym is Neo and who is believed to be the One who will save humanity from the "matrix". The matrix itself is a behemoth machine that uses human bodies as living batteries and that keep them alive to survive. In order to keep them quiet in their amniotic bath, the matrix runs a huge program that sends virtual images in their mind and they think to live in a world that looks exactly like the one we are living in. The way out of the Matrix is fairly known, you can take either the blue or the red pill, a choice that allows you to cut yourself from the wire, which binds your mind to the program and to leave the soaking bath where you have spent the entirety of your life. All you saw and knew before that was only in your imagination and programmed by a machine.

Following the commercial success of the sci-fi blockbuster, a series of books of essays appeared through the wire of academic presses, for instance *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (Popular Culture and Philosophy), Willian Irvin éditeur, Open Court, Chicago (2002) & *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* by Christopher Grau (Oxford University Press, 2005) published by established professors or scholars in philosophy. The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek too wrote an essay on the movie – the matrix or two side of perversion, 1999¹ - his interest for cinema is known, he also produced and presented a show on psychoanalytic Hitchcock on the BBC in 2006- indicating a general fad for this low-culture phenomenon as a potential philosophical object. In France, the attitude shifted a little bit from the apparent seriousness of academic publications to adopt a more pedagogical point of view. The movie, in *Matrix, machine philosophique*, seems to be a pretext for re-enacting famous allegories such as Plato's cave or far-east philosophy such as the way of Tao. The editors, all of them out of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, one of the most elitist and selective French school of philosophy, were Alain Badiou, Thomas Benatouïl, Elie During, Patrice Maniglier and David Rabouin – young men for the most, born around the 70's and who grew up watching Tron, Star Wars and Terminator, reading Philip K. Dick and playing Space Invaders on their first Atari 500. These were the generational leisure occupations of nowadays thirty something young people in Western areas of the world, and we can compare this situation with the taste for popular cinema, literature and theatre, that what the young surrealists praised back in the 20's. One could of course be surprised of Badiou's presence in this group, but he certainly had a golden opportunity to take once again the opposite of what the established philosophy claims worth the journey, especially in France. But the *Matrix*,

¹ Figure dans les actes du colloque « Inside The Matrix. Zur Kritik der zynischen Virtualität » (Karlsruhe, 28 octobre 1999)

machine philosophique, was only a sort of prequel of a following series of publications under the banner of “pop philosophy”, made by true philosophers. In 2004, a young French writer and essayist of Tunisian origin, Mehdi Belaj Kacem publishes a book-interview with Philippe Nassif, journalist at the hip magazine *Technikart*, simply entitled “pop philosophy”. Just to position him, he was formerly married to Chloé Delaume, a French young writer who became famous for *Corpus simsi* a book she wrote following her addiction to the *Sims* video game (a simulation game in which you take care of a virtual family). But after the 500 pages of pop philosophy explained through the rather unentertaining form of a dialogue that quotes *Fight Club*, Lacan or risks the hypothesis of September 11 attacks as “a forced return to the real”, no strong argument emerges. Belaj Kacem, spiritual son of Badiou, gave first the name of “pop philosophy” to a book, unfortunately, without proposing anything but a theoretical menu, without any real course : the temptation of a rapid celebrity seemed to be the main motivation of Belaj Kacem, who had provoked a sudden craze in the medias (the fact that he looks like a model surely helps). This isolated attempt took place in a wave of other publications that are for me more relevant, for the reasons I will now expose. These reasons are linked to the fact that a pop philosophy, if applicable, would with great chances gain conceptual body and flesh not only by opposing virtual to real, or contingency to determinism or just quoting random mass-culture phenomena in order to draw a second-rate theory from it.

In *Matrix*, *Machine philosophique*, published in 2003, the authors deny doing this, preferring the term “travaux pratiques”. But once again, the conclusion of the book, or of the other essays published under the name of “pop philosophy” does not lead to a revolutionary re-negotiation with major concepts such as freedom, desire, perception or cognitive processes. Maybe the pop has to remain at the surface or in a very reactive interaction with novelty, as an intercessor to quote again Deleuze.

3. Why the artists have such an great importance in the new philosophy?

In my opinion, the most relevant operations of “pop philosophy” are correlated directly or indirectly to aesthetics. Indeed, the last important publication related to this pop wave is entitled after a pun on the possible refreshment of the old version of what is now called “Fresh Théorie”. The series of books, whose design has been made by Thomas Lélou, a burlesque artist famous for his *Manuel de la photoratie* (2006) is a collection of essays that followed a series of lectures in Paris performed by sociologists, artists, philosophers, psychoanalysts or intellectuals.

The two founders of this collective “Fresh théorie” are Mark Alizart, assistant of the director of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and who used to work at the Centre Pompidou, and Christophe Kihm, one of the editors of the French art magazine *Artpress* (whose director is Catherine Millet, also known for her sulfurous sexual life). They organized a series of lecture at the Espace Paul Ricard in Paris, exhibition space of the Foundation Paul Ricard pour l’art contemporain (they also give a very highly rated prize). These weekly meetings took place every monday and were anti-seriously called: “Lundi, c’est théorie” – indeed, the expression reminds everyone who grew up in France in the 80’s of Etienne Chatilliez’s movie *La Vie est un long fleuve tranquille* (1988). In this story that opposes two families, one wealthy and very traditional, the Le Quesnoys and one pretty vulgar and of low social condition, the Groseilles, when the latter is ready for meal, a ritual sentence is pronounced every Monday “Lundi, c’est ravioli”. The tag sentence is a pure pop reference, as if the theory served on Monday was just as good as a can of ravioli: this gives you an idea of the spirit of the whole enterprise.

Both part of the artworld, they invoke the artistic origin of their theoretical enterprise as the core experience for new forms of thinking. I quote Mark Alizart in an interview presenting the second volume, Fresh Théorie, the *Black Album* (2006) on the website of the publisher, Léo Scheer. The statement take its roots directly in the aesthetic productions of the late 20th Century, what is also vaguely and in a rough, undefined, way called contemporary art : “*l’art contemporain c’est l’endroit où des objets théoriques se promènent et forcent la pensée; c’est l’endroit où les sciences humaines, dans les années 80-90 après leur collapsus éditorial sont renés, et où des théories, des philosophèmes se sont produits de nouveau et on est tous les enfants à cet égard et de cette manière de l’art contemporain*”. Two facts draw here my attention: first, Alizart considers the contemporary art landscape as a field of conceptual production in itself, almost equivalent to the pure practice of philosophy through texts, conferences or empiric experiences of the world; this idea is attested by several contributions in the book, especially Patrice Maniglier’s essay “du conceptuel dans l’art et dans la philosophie en particulier” (p. 491-514) which puts on a symmetric level the production of concepts through forms or through language; and second, he implicitly states that the relative decline of sciences of man in the editorial world opened the way to a renewal of philosophical and theoretical thought with an other starting point. In that case, a financial aspect crosses the theoretical one indeed, as it would be truly naïve to think that the huge money speculation around contemporary art did not facilitate a book production linked to this new flourishing business, one would say, just as for the blockbuster.

Conclusion

Is it just a fashionable second category of easy-thinking or a real way of doing philosophy in modern (postmodern) life? Arguably, this alternative has been largely in dispute after *Matrix*, *machine philosophique* was released and I am sometimes dubious on the real validity of this form of philosophy, which roots itself in the popular mass-culture, a theme already developed in the early 20th Century by Benjamin or Adorno, and later by Henri Lefebvre or Jean Baudrillard. One of the weakest point of the movement, if we can call it this way temporarily, is the numerous publications that were only designed to justify the validity of this approach in spite of the impurity of the subject matters. Elie During published an essay on skateboard in the January/February issue of *Critique*, which can be considered as a genuine attempt to do philosophy out of a popular practice. The result is half-convincing in its conceptual framework, but once again, the starting point of the reflection is a book made by an artist, Raphael Zarka, who undertook a story of this deconstructionist surf culture, following Deleuze's latest concerns described in *Pourparlers*. Maybe, instead of insisting on the pop aspect of today's philosophy, it would be more relevant to have a retrospective look at some theoretical productions that remain indefinable (elusive) or that has been considered as secondary for a long time. Then, pop philosophy would not be a recent breakthrough, but just the resurgence of topical and popular aspects of French, but that has always been present. The question now would be, as During and Maniglier asked : what's left of Pop philosophy?

Pour le 1

Ethan Acres - Francis Alÿs - Alexis Bertrand - Pierre Bismuth et Michel Gondry - Mircea Cantor - Mary Ellen Carroll - Claude Closky - Jeremy Deller - Yan Duyvendak - Peter Fischli et David Weiss - Jeppe Hein - Mark Hosking - Kolkosz - Thomas Lélou - Edouard Levé - Gianni Motti - Sven Pålsson - Julia Scher - Alain Séchas - Beat Streuli - Tatiana Trouvé - Joana Vasconcelos - Jordan Wolfson.

Pour le 2

Et la participation des artistes réunis par Le Commissariat : TATIANA TROUVÉ, ROMAN OPALKA, JASON RHOADES, MIKE GIANT, THOMAS LÉLU, ÉDOUARD LEVÉ, KOLKOZ, LAURENT GRASSO

Pour le 3

Eric Mangion, director of the art school la Villa Arson, selected pages of the last 20 years old artpress